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ABSTRACT

Case studies of a Southern Appalachian urban middle-class family, a rural lower-class family, and a rural middle-class family illustrate the nature of Appalachian ethnicity and its relationship to school experience. The variables of ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and rural/urban residence are investigated through structured interviews with parents and their children who are either high school students or recent dropouts. The interviews gather data on attitudes about and experiences of schooling and education, life history, social network, ethnicity, and family and kinship. The case studies indicate that while cultural, symbolic, and structural Appalachian ethnicity is related to a more negative school experience, residence and socioeconomic class are strong mediating factors. Urban, middle-class Appalachians have a more positive school experience. Teachers and school administrators are advised to be sensitive to these factors in terms of understanding the school experience of Appalachian students. The document includes 20 references. (CS)

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Ethnicity and Education in Southern Appalachia:

Three Case Studies

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ETHNICITY AND EDUCATION IN SOUTHERN APPALACHIA:

THREE CASE STUDIES

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this paper is to present data from three family case studies which illustrate the nature of Appalachian ethnicity and its relationship to school experience in a Southern Appalachian school district. This particular research was part of a broader study funded by the National Science Foundation which investigated the relationship of Appalachian ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and rural/urban residence to educational decisions and attitudes. As part of this broader study, seventeen family case studies were developed to allow for a more in-depth analysis of the nature of Appalachian ethnicity and its relationship to the school experience. These case studies exhibited various combinations of the three major variables being investigated: ethnicity (operationally defined as a three-generation family depth in the region), socioeconomic class, and rural/urban residence. The three case studies presented in this paper are (1) an urban middle-class Appalachian family, (2) a rural middle-class family, and (3) a rural lower-class Appalachian family. By examining these three case studies within the framework of the larger study, this paper will provide an understanding of the complex nature of Appalachian ethnicity and its relationship to school experience.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

By most standards of educational success, such as dropout rate, percentage of students going to college, and achievement scores, education in Appalachia does not measure up to education in the rest of the nation (Appalachian Consortium 1981; Caudill 1962; Graff 1962; Parker 1970; Schrag 1972). Most recently, the Appalachian Regional Commission (1986) has reported that the average dropout rate in Appalachia is 10% higher than the national average and that approximately 50% of the counties in the Appalachian region have dropout rates that exceed 40%. Yet, research into the possible causes of these "failures" has been relatively scarce. Many non-research based commentaries on education in Appalachia have suggested explanations which are highly similar to those found for low educational success among more visible ethnic groups in the United States -- poverty, culture conflict, cultural incongruency, and prejudice (Branscome 1972; Browning 1978; Clark 1974; Ikenberry 1970; Ogletree 1978; Miller 1977). However, there is little research available to either substantiate or refute these observations. A few community studies carried out in Appalachia have included general observations about education and schools (Beaver 1976; Foster 1977; Hicks 1976; Weller 1965; Stephenson 1968). Other research has focused on the relationship of self concept to low educational achievement (Lord 1971; Reck 1978, 1980; Reck and Reck 1980). Little research has focused on the possible relationship between Appalachian ethnicity and the school experience, probably due to the controversy over the existence

and nature of the concept of ethnicity as applied to Appalachia. This minimal amount of research has, nevertheless, suggested that Appalachian students face many of the same types of problems in school that more familiar ethnic groups face. The research reported in this paper is designed to investigate this phenomena further.

METHODOLOGY

Family case studies were selected which represented the major variables examined in the research: ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and urban/rural residence. Seventeen case studies were completed which represented various possible combinations of these variables (for example, rural, Appalachian, middle-class; rural, Appalachian, lower-class; urban, Appalachian, middle-class; urban, Appalachian, lower-class; and so forth). A series of structured interviews were administered to each case study, including parents and children who were either current high school students or recent dropouts. These interview schedules consisted of the following: school/education attitudes and experiences; life history; social network; ethnicity; and family and kinship. Each case study student was also observed for a minimum of one day in the classroom. Data from the case studies were interpreted within the framework of the larger research project which integrated data collected through surveys of high school students, a textbook analysis, and ethnographic interviews and observations with a wide-range of adults, students, teachers and school administrators.

DATA SOURCE

The data source was a consolidated county school system in Southern Appalachia. The county is served by a single high school which has 1450 students. The county population, including the school population, is diverse in terms of the variables investigated. Approximately 35% of the county population lives in the single urban area. The population of this single urban area is predominantly middle-class "outsiders," as they are called. A large tourist industry and a mid-sized state university have brought many outsiders to the area, although people with three-generational family depths in the region still predominate. This tourist industry and the university have also increased the socioeconomic diversity of the county. Thus, the single county town is not only seen as "urban," but also as the home of "outsiders" who are "rich," in contrast to the rural areas of the county which are seen as the home of "natives" who are, if not "poor," at least not wealthy.

CASE STUDIES

The Poe Family. The Poe family is a lower-class, rural, Appalachian family. The father, Ronnie, is in his early forties, is self-employed and disabled; he repairs small engines on everything from lawnmowers to farm equipment. Ocassionally, he works on car engines for friends and neighbors. He has no set fees for his labor, but asks people to "pay me what you think its worth." His wife Mabel, also in her early forties, works as a cook in the county hospital, located almost 20 miles away. Their eldest daughter, Sarah, is the only child to have

graduated from high school; she is married and lives with her family in a town 70 miles away. Their other daughter, 20 years of age, dropped out of school when she was 16 to get married; she lives with her husband and small son in a near-by house. The Poe's two sons, Ernest (22 years old) and Dennis (17), both dropped out of school when they were 16 and now live at home. Ernest is employed by a company that manufactures wicker furniture; Dennis is unemployed.

The Poes exhibit cultural characteristics that are shared with their more affluent Appalachian native neighbors: certain speech patterns (such as the characteristic "h" before words that begin with vowels), a large and significant kin-network, a strong religious fundamentalism, a strong attachment for the mountains, and so forth.

Perhaps, more significantly, they express strong distinctions between themselves and those that they describe as "outsiders" or "Floridians," the latter a generic term for people born outside the mountains. Moreover, these distinctions are often made within the context of conflict, both perceived and actual. Ronnie, the father, talks about how the only person who ever tried to cheat him on one of his repair jobs was a "woman from Florida." He claims that his wife has been passed over for promotions at her job at the hospital because of the "jack-legged doctors who ain't from around here who favor outsiders." He argues that the locals who live in town have been "bought-off by the outsiders and side-up with them." He finds that outsiders never abide by a principle that real mountain people believe in: "Don't shame them that don't have."

His sons Dennis and Ernest both blame to a significant degree their decision to drop out of high school on the conflict between locals and outsiders at the high school. Both speak of how "we never felt like we belonged over there." Dennis recalls with bitterness the times that he was called a hick and redneck and an incident in class when he once asked a question and another student said, "What holler did you crawl out of?" Ernest claims that he quit playing basketball, and in large part dropped out of school, because the coach favored players from town. He remembers the time that he and some friends were waiting in line at the movies and some "town kids" butted in line and one of them laughed and said, "It's okay, these rednecks don't mind waiting."

The Poes see the high school as basically divided between two groups: outsiders and locals. In speaking of these groups and the conflicts and antagonisms between them, the Poes use the terms "town people," "outsiders," "Floridians," and "bigshots" interchangeably. On the surface, the use of these terms seem to confuse residence, socioeconomic class, and ethnicity. However, on another level their coterminality indicates a demographic reality -- the town <u>is</u> the home of middle-class and upper-class outsiders.

<u>The Miller Family</u>. The Miller family is a rural, middle-class, Appalachian family. The father, Larry, is in his late 30's and works as a manager at the town water plant. He graduated from a two-year community college. His wife, Texie, is 36 and works at a local company that manufactures lingerie. She is a high school graduate. They have two children: Lisa, a freshman at the high school, and Paul, a sixth grader. Like the Poes, the ancestors of the Miller family on both the father's

and mother's sides have lived in Appalachia for three-four generations. They live in a rural area of the county on land inherited from Larry's parents. Also like the Poes, they have a large and strong kinship network on both sides of the family. Interaction with these kin is both frequent and important. Speech patterns are less characteristic of Appalachia than the Poe family, although such things as accent and verb use are consistent with rural southern patterns. Religion is significant, although the Millers attend a Baptist church which belongs to the Southern Baptist Convention, unlike the Poes who attend a Missionary Baptist church which is independent.

The mother and father identify with the mountains. That identity seems significant in their lives. Larry, who is a Viet Nam veteran, says, " when I was in the service, the guys up north and all, used to make jokes about me being a hillbilly and all that. It bothered me then, but now I'm proud of it. After I grew up and realized that the place I'm from is worth as much as where they're from, why, I'm proud of it now." Their daughter, Lisa, shows little if any attachment or identification with the mountains. She hopes to live outside of the region when she is an adult.

Lisa and her parents see significant differences between outsiders and local people, but these differences are not evaluated as strongly as in the Poe family. They do perceive relationships between outsiders and locals, especially from the rural areas, to be somewhat tense. Texie tells of one of Lisa's high school teachers who, the first day of class, said that he always had trouble from the kids from Mabel. "Lisa talked back

to him and said she was proud she was from Mabel." Texie also speaks of a dropout from her part of the county who left school because "the H.P. kids looked down on him so he quit. I think dropping out is connected with the attitudes of other students -- if they respect you or not."

Within the high school, Lisa distinguishes between three groups of students: the popular group consisting of mostly students from the town; the unpopular group, consisting mostly of economically poor students from the rural areas; and students, like herself, who belong to neither group.

The Morris Family. The Morris family is an urban, middle-class, Appalachian family. Harold, the father, is sixty years old and has been a high school teacher, a businessman, and is currently head of a local social service agency. Phyllis, the mother, has worked at a number of odd jobs in order to supplement the family income, and is currently working the cash register at a restaurant. They have four children: Linda, 31, a high school graduate who went to one year of business school and currently works as a secretary; Michael, 27, a high school graduate who attended a university for one year and is currently employed as an assistant kitchen manager in a large hotel; and Veronica and Monica, twins, who at 17 are high school seniors.

The Morris family, like the Poes and the Millers, have large and strong kinship networks; they attend three family reunions every year. Their speech, while carrying the accent of the rural south, lacks the dialectical distinctiveness of the mountain region. They own their own house which is located in a

typical small town neighborhood of green lawns and two-car garages. They own land in the country that they have inherited and they rent that land as farmland. There is little feeling of attachment to the land. Harold says of his land in the country, "I don't depend on it or look forward to it." The family has traveled widely throughout the U.S. on family vacations. They attend a Lutheran church in the country near where Harold grew up, rather than the Lutheran church in town.

The Morris family members, while making distinctions between themselves and newcomers, are not really antagonistic about those differences. Their neighbors are mostly outsiders. In fact, many of their views about newcomers are positive. Harold speaks of the positive "new ways of doing things" that outsiders bring. He says, "I think the native mountain person, the younger generation at least..., it's becoming more like the outside group and is much more liberal...There's a kind of coming together which I think is good."

While accepting a mountain personal identity to some extent, the Morris family makes strong distinctions between themselves, as natives, and poor, rural families who are natives. Harold states, "I'm proud to be from the mountains," and then adds, but "we still have kind of like the Cratis Williams (a scholar of traditional Appalachian culture and traditions) mountain people that's a little bit different." He makes it clear that natives who live in the town and who are educated are different from natives who are "out in the county." He states that "...a redneck being someone from out in the county...if they're a native from the town, there's a difference, seems like, from

being out in the county." Thus, Harold Morris consistently makes distinctions between himself as a native of Appalachia and those natives who are rural and less affluent.

His twin daughters make the same kind of distinctions among high school students. Like Lisa Miller, they view the high school as comprised basically of three groups: the popular group, the middle group, and the "redneck" group. It is, perhaps, interesting to note that they use a more derogatory, stronger term ("redneck") to refer to the latter group than does Lisa ("unpopular"). However, it is also interesting to note that both of the twins were called "hillbillies" when they were in elementary school, probably due to their accents, they recall. Their school experience has been basically a positive one. They participate in some school activities and they both plan to study nursing at a nearby community college.

RESULTS AND IMPORTANCE

The three case studies demonstrate the complex nature of Appalachian ethnicity which is best understood as consisting of three interlocking analytical components: cultural, symbolic, and structural. The cultural component is based on distinctive cultural patterns. The symbolic is anchored in cultural identification and perceived cultural differences. The structural is defined by opposition (political, economic, social) between groups which are culturally and/or symbolically distinctive. Contemporary Appalachian ethnicity is primarily symbolic and structural, although the cultural component strengthens distinctions based on these two components. By varying the factors of residence and socioeconomic class, the

three case studies presented in the paper illustrate the effect that class and residence have on both ethnicity and the school experience. All three families make strong symbolic distinctions between themselves as natives of Appalachia and outsiders. But the degree of structural distinctiveness made is strongly mediated by class and residence. The Poes, rural and lower class, saw the conflict and struggle between natives and outsiders as paramount in their lives and in the schools. They also perceived the differences and the conflict in terms of a dochotomy of "us versus them." The Millers, rural and middle-class, perceived some structural antagonism, but to a much lesser extent. They also distinguished themselves, to some extent, from their poorer Appalachian peers. The Morris family, urban and middle-class, saw very little conflict and tended to identify to some extent with outsiders. They made strong distinctions between themselves as natives and poor, rural natives.

The impact of this three-dimensional ethnicity on the school experience is clearly visible in the three case studies. While Appalachian ethnicity (cultural, symbolic, structural) is related to a more negative school experience, the factors of residence and socioeconomic class are strong mediating factors. Urban, middle-class Appalachians have a much more positive school experience that is more similar to their non-Appalachian counterparts.

These data are important for school teachers and administrators working in the Appalachian region. Since

Appalachian people are predominantly of white, Anglo-Saxon heritage, the concept of ethnicity has rarely been used to understand the school experience of children in the region. This research demonstrates that Appalachian ethnicity is a factor which teachers and school administrators need to be sensitive toward in understanding the school experience of their students. In a broader sense, this research suggests that ethnicity can be a complex phenomena and that teachers and school administrators need to be aware of the cultural, symbolic, and structural construction of ethnicity.

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